

Pedro Castillo is an opportunity for the Peruvian Left

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The surprising victory of a candidate representing a “Marxist and Leninist” party shows that rural Peru cannot be ignored. But much more organization is needed if the Peruvian left is to build lasting political power.

The first round of Peru’s presidential elections this week produced a surprising upset. Pedro Castillo, a primary school teacher and candidate for the leftist Peru Libre party, came in a solid first place, with about 19% of the vote in the current count. The result surprised Lima and the international media. Their focus on the more established candidates, or those with urban support, ignored the mass of voters in the provinces who are deeply dissatisfied with Peru’s political and economic status quo.

Castillo rocketed to national fame in 2017 during a nationwide teachers’ strike against the government of then-President Pedro Pablo Kuczynski. After being recruited by Peru Libre to run for president this year, he was only a minor candidate. Even a month ago, polls had him at 3-5%. But his performance in the debates brought him into the public eye, and he gained more support from sympathetic voters when other candidates began attacking him. Despite his rise at the end of the campaign, the media was not prepared for his success. On election night, CNN Peru did not have an image of him it could use and had to show a generic silhouette while showing the results.

The party he represents, Peru Libre, is rather obscure, founded and led by former Junin governor Vladimir Cerrón.

Cerrón has described the party as “left-wing socialist-Marxist, Leninist and Mariateguist.” Its platform supports the nationalization of resources and industry, increased funding for education, and the creation of a new constitution to overturn the one imposed by authoritarian neoliberal president Alberto Fujimori in the 1990s.

Unlike the political sectors represented by Verónica Mendoza, who came third in the 2016 elections and was expected to be the standard bearer for the left in these elections, Perú Libre is markedly conservative on social issues. The party has also stirred controversy due to the fact that Cerrón received a suspended prison sentence for alleged corruption when he was governor.

Castillo’s support comes from the interior and southern provinces, especially the Andean highlands, where the population is poorer and more rural. The city of Lima, on the other hand, represents a third of the Peruvian population and is much wealthier than the rest of the country. Lima, like most large Latin American cities, is right-wing and tends to support candidates ranging from the liberal center to the extreme right.

This is the context in which rural Peruvian voters repudiated the neoliberal consensus that was expected to dominate. In addition to coming out on top in the presidential race, Peru Libre also topped the congressional polls, winning thirty-seven of the one hundred and thirty seats in the legislature, according to projections at the time of this writing. Many of these new congressmen will be ordinary Peruvians with no experience in politics and who probably never expected to win.

This is not the first time that voters from outside Lima have surprised the political class. Last year, in the extraordinary congressional elections, the Union for Peru party (UPP), allied with the indigenous nationalist “ethnocacerista” movement led by jailed rebel leader Antauro Humala, dominated

the south, defying polls to win thirteen seats. The UPP vote plummeted in these elections and most of its supporters seemed to go to Castillo.

The circumstances under which Castillo now enters a runoff could not be better. His opponent is Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of Alberto Fujimori, who came second in the 2016 presidential election but is now widely disliked. Her involvement in the Odebrecht corruption scandal, which the U.S. Justice Department called "the largest foreign bribery case in history," and a couple of jail stints have reduced her first-round vote share from 40% to 13%. He has received enough support to make it to the runoff, but in every second-round runoff scenario that has been tossed around, he loses to every other candidate.

Pedro Castillo, however, has not been polled against her or anyone else, as none of the polling agencies expected him to make it to the second round. The match could be anyone's. Fujimori is the weakest opponent for Castillo, and he is potentially the weakest opponent for her, given his far-left representation in a fairly conservative country. He may attack her for her connections to his father, and she may attack him for his alleged connections to the guerrilla group widely denounced for human rights atrocities, Sendero Luminoso, a chronic indictment of socialists in Peru.

If Castillo wins the second round, scheduled for June 4, governing will indeed be an uphill battle. The new Congress is extremely divided, with several right-wing parties controlling a supermajority of seats. In the last legislature alone, Congress has impeached or pushed for the resignation of three presidents. It is not hard to imagine them doing so again with Pedro Castillo if he interferes with their agenda.

And although Castillo and Peru Libre were the most voted, they have no real political movement behind them. Their victory was not the result of years of organizing, as in the case of other

leftist movements in Latin America; most voters who elected Castillo did so in the last two weeks. Unlike Bolivians who support the Movement for Socialism or Brazilians who support the Workers' Party, most Peru Libre voters are not wedded to the party in any way, and their support could dissipate in the next election.

It is also unclear how disciplined its political structure and new representatives will be. Peru still lacks a strong left at the national level that can give a unified response to the crises. Without that, an anti-neoliberal president is vulnerable, as was the case with Paraguayan President Fernando Lugo, who was ousted by a congress in which he had very few allies.

Castillo's supporters portray him as the "Peruvian Evo Morales". While the similarities are there – a rural union organizer from a modest background – the reality is that Castillo has only recently come to the fore, while Evo spent years as a prominent figure challenging successive right-wing governments, including a failed presidential bid in 2002. Peru Libre is a minor party that has had some success in the past.

Castillo's connections to the party are new and probably limited. He has already run as a candidate, but his main organizing experience comes from a 2017 teachers' strike and as a grassroots leader formed out of the SUTEP union. The partisan politics of that strike alone were tense and divided, not to mention the union movement across the country. By comparison, Bolivia's Movement for Socialism (MAS) organized the unions and peasant confederations for years to create a powerful unified political instrument. This organization has given MAS durability, allowing it to respond to the 2019 coup and regain power.

Right now, the Peruvian left remains disunited. Verónica Mendoza, despite losing much of her 2016 support, still took 8% of the vote with her Juntos por el Perú (JPP) alliance.

There are significant rifts between the two camps. Mendoza and most of JPP are socially progressive, and their support for causes such as the legalization of same-sex marriage clashes with Castillo's denunciation of "gender ideology," a term used by Latin American conservatives such as Jair Bolsonaro. Many Mendoza supporters have also accused Castillo of being a demagogue and of not being authentically left-wing, pointing to his opposition to a wealth tax.

Peru Libre and the JPP attempted to form an alliance before the 2020 elections, but that alliance was rejected by JPP supporters, who objected to Cerron's corruption problems, and the deal fell apart. Building a leftist power that goes beyond individual attempts to win votes from one election to the next will have to start with a reconciliation between these two camps. Mendoza, for his part, says he wants to discuss with Castillo and hopes to make sure he does not bow to business interests as former President Ollanta Humala did.

Building socialist institutional power from nothing is easier said than done. But if it can be done, there are many issues the left must address: the inequality between Lima and the provinces, the abuses of multinational corporations polluting the land and stealing Peru's wealth, and the endless cycle of corrupt politicians breaking people's confidence in the power of political mobilization. This work will begin with the push for the drafting of a new constitution.

The odds were against Evo Morales, but he succeeded in changing Bolivia for the better. The same is possible in Peru. The first task, however, is to defeat Keiko Fujimori in the second round and prevent the return of a right-wing authoritarian government.